REPRINT Summer 2010 *Nonprofit Quarterly*

ORGANIZING

Unstill Waters: The Fluid Role of Networks in Social Movements

by Robin Katcher

It is a marvel that any social movement network stays together long enough to accomplish change.

An individual social movement can span many generations. During that time, it is likely to face many different, complicated political contexts. As time passes, a social movement develops its analysis of a problem and changes the language and definitions of things. Often, it meets success and then encounters the next round of problems caused by the preliminary solution gained. Its members will have passionate disagreements about strategy and approach such that they part ways and new members with new views emerge. In other words, movements are living beings, affected by all manner of influences and sometimes embodying great diversity. It is a marvel, then, that any social movement network stays knit together long enough to accomplish big societal change. How do these movement networks do it?

"Networks are not social movements; but social-justice movements need networks," says Marco Davis, a veteran network builder in the Latino community. For anyone involved in a grassroots effort to create change, this statement

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may seem obvious. But it is hardly simple to describe or understand—even when you are right in the middle of it.

The work of the network adds up to more than the sum of its parts.

What movement-oriented networks do best, and what it takes to build and invest in them over time, often seems difficult to pin down. At Management Assistance Group (MAG), my colleagues and I have worked with organizations that are part of movement networks, those that act as network hubs, and those that come together to create new networks. Some movement networks flourish and others falter. I set out to deepen our understanding of these movement networks by reviewing the scholarly research and interviewing creative, committed leaders who have built networks, even in the most unfriendly environments.

The organic and responsive nature of networks makes them difficult to study. Networks play essential roles within movements; but how they do so and even which roles they play are not static. This fluidity causes movement networks sometimes to appear disorganized and unwieldy, which has led some to devalue their contribution and others to push for formal structure and control.

But a deeper look suggests that openness and flexibility are necessary components. Without the ability to learn, adapt, and change, these networks wither and become uninviting and ultimately irrelevant to new leaders. They lose their ability to authentically respond to political and membership complexities and ever-changing needs of movements in the context of the unstill waters of society.

The Essential Roles of Movement Networks

While there are many different types of networks, for the purposes of this article we define movement networks as the following:

1. **multi-organizational:** movement networks link independent organizations and activists to one another and through a central hub organization;
2. **movement oriented:** movement networks intentionally contribute to a broader social movement;
3. **focused on the long term:** movement networks stick together for the long haul and join to advance interests that extend beyond a single-issue campaign; and
4. **porous:** movement networks have more flexible boundaries than a formal franchise structure, such as the Girl Scouts or Habitat for Humanity.

Their purpose is not to serve members alone but to meaningfully analyze, understand, and foster the development of a movement by working with and for others in the network. My research suggests that these movement networks play the following concrete and essential roles to support and contribute to their social movements.

Building linkages and connection with a broader movement. Like most networks, movement networks must foster relationships among members. But members must also see their work for justice as fundamentally linked to that of others and as part of the larger movement. Networks "help develop a movement consciousness: thinking of self as a part of something bigger than you," emphasizes Dan Petegorsky, a longtime network builder in the progressive movement.

Members must agree that by joining together within the network, not only do they gain benefits for their own work but also the work of the network adds up to more than the sum of its parts. Its aggregate power results in gains that

Defining Movements

Drawing on the work of several theorists, Beth Zemsky and Dave Mann offer a clear definition of *movements*: "a collection of persons or groups who come together around a common concern. Typically their mission is to bring about some type of societal change relative to their concern."*

Movements, they note, are characterized by the following elements: collective intentional action, continuity of sustained action, outsider status, scope and scale, and formation of collective identity. In the context of this article, the term *movement* describes a multisector progressive social-justice movement and "submovements," including economic justice, racial justice, reproductive health and justice, environment, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual rights, and pro-immigrant rights.

*Beth Zemsky and Dave Mann, "Building Organizations in a Movement Moment," *Social Policy: Organizing for Social and Economic Justice*, vol.28, no.3, 2008.

will make a difference to their constituencies as well as advance the movement as a whole. A network "allows people's knowledge, creativity, [and] strength to flourish," says Stephanie Poggi, a network builder in reproductive health and justice. It then pulls together local knowledge and diverse experiences to create a larger understanding of the problems that constituencies face. To do so, members are asked to see themselves as part of an "us" and examine how that "us" is positioned within and contributes to the broader movement.

Deepen agreement on a shared political frame. Together members must understand, integrate, and contribute to a shared vision; align on shared values and principles; and deepen a sense of trust, belonging, and identity. According to Rachel Tompkins, a longtime leader in rural education and children's issues, networks "need to create a value system—not just information and policy . . . building and deepening values." More than any other factor, this shared political frame connects individuals and organizations to networks, and networks to movements. "Networked nonprofits cannot take values alignment among partners for granted," write Jane Wei-Skillern and Sonia Marciano.[1] "Networked nonprofits are often far more productive because they don't have to rely on formal control mechanisms. Instead, their partners' internal motivation and commitment drive them to work hard for the shared vision of the network."

Those we interviewed note that building such alignment is not a onetime activity at the start of a network (though at the outset, more work may be required), nor is it simple. Political frames must grow and adjust over time.

The societal problems that movements seek to address are large and complex, and so is the analysis required to build and adjust the frame. What looks like a solution to some can unintentionally affect others.[2] Unless it's used to spark the network to deepen and adjust its analysis, this unintended impact can erode a network's cohesion and effectiveness.

This requires movement networks to not only bring diverse constituencies together but also center analysis on the lived experiences of those most affected by the problem the movement seeks to solve. Networks provide the venue for the "understanding of how constituencies of different races, ethnicities, classes, genders, sexualities, immigrant status, ability, and other historically oppressed groups are differently impacted by the same problem," observes Darlene Nipper, an LGBT leader.

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Networks help build this analysis, says Peter Hardie, an economic-justice network leader, by "pushing political questions" and "deepening people's understanding of other parts of the movement ideology, politics, campaigns, organizations." Networks also intend to understand the opposition, its frame, and its strategies. As Petegorsky explains, networks "need to deal with wedge issues openly and honestly. Then they can't divide you. Look at how potential allies are pitted against one another. Watch it closely, because this will change over time."

Coordinate efforts, take joint action, and disseminate information about what works. Networks facilitate and support coordinated action among organizational members. Social movements need coordinated action to build momentum, demonstrate support, and push for change. Some networks engage in coordinated action by proactively designing and leading joint national efforts with their members; others coordinate, support, and amplify the existing work of members to deepen impact.

Networks become vehicles for dissemination of messages, approaches, programs, innovation, and ideas to network members and, sometimes, to the public at large.[3] Effective dissemination requires strong, trusting relationships among innovators and possible implementers. As Marco Davis explains, members "need to understand new models [for doing the work], and [to spread them] you need credibility and trust so members can acknowledge the value and be willing to try it themselves. You need trusting relationships in order to spread innovation and successful approaches. [The network is] not just a space for sharing convictions; you also need mechanisms and how-to's so the parts of the network can deliberately build the movement."

Engage in advocacy campaigns. Some networks develop a shared policy framework that members

"Our power comes from our members."

—Diann Rust-Tierney, a criminal-justice-reform-movement leader

advance locally, while others run specific, joint national legislative campaigns, and others do both. Effective policy campaigns help "cut the issue," give members "clear handles" to focus, and specify the complex problems movements seek to address. They also must seek to win real improvements in the lives of constituencies.

Several interviewees discussed why they believe it's critical to advance policy through a network. "If we try to shift policy in isolation, we often make mistakes," says Moira Bowman, an experienced organizer in reproductive justice and progressive movement building.

Interviewees say that better policy emerges through the input of diverse perspectives and that networks have an important role in developing policies and mobilizing members to win change.

Effective campaigns require a combination of seizing political opportunities when they arise and engaging in the slow, steady work of building political power that must be exploited when the moment is ripe. Networks help create the level of organization necessary, according to Petegorsky, by "develop[ing] the leaders, materials, connections that prepare people to run campaigns." This allows networks and their members to quickly take advantage of political opportunities.

Network membership alone is often insufficient to win a specific campaign. Interviewees have found that successful campaigns require creating coalitions with those outside the traditional boundaries of the network, including unlikely allies that may agree with the network on only one issue and that have significant political influence. In this way, campaigns are an important avenue for expanding and activating network members; reaching out to those at the periphery of the movement; and building power, influence, and visibility.

Unlike other policy-change efforts disconnected from movements, winning a specific policy change is not the end goal for networks, but rather a means to the ultimate end that gets one step closer to the movement's long-term vision. Tompkins says that it's important to win policy campaigns, but campaigns are also "about spreading values to others in members' communities. Winning a campaign is great, but hopefully [it's] building more long-term support for the cause. We must . . . tie policy to values so that over time people connect to a set of values beyond a specific policy."

Marshall and increase resources and capacity. The strength and power of networks are derived in large part from aggregating the strength and power of members. "Our power comes from our members," observes Diann Rust-Tierney, a leader in the criminal-justice-reform movement. "We are only as strong as they are." Networks therefore must focus on building the organizational capacity, effectiveness, and sustainability of members individually and collectively. The role of a network is to "hel[p] organizations to do their local work and connec[t] those leaders to a broader movement and sustain[n] their organizations over time," Poggi says. "We walk with them through their evolution."

For nearly all the network leaders interviewed for this research, this means helping deliver capacity-building services (i.e., technical assistance, leadership development, training, coaching, and on-site organizational development) and actively working to raise money and visibility for the network and its parts. Some organize philanthropy and make a case for why expanding giving to network members can increase a foundation's impact. According to Tompkins, a network should help "make the parts more credible and legitimate and sustainable, especially since networks can sometimes get access to national foundation money that locals could never reach on their own."

Cultivate new leaders and build their identity as part of the movement. Most movement leaders gain experience by first engaging with local organizations in their own community. But their capacity to develop concrete leadership skills, think strategically, build relationships, and broaden their own movement analysis is often enhanced by involvement in movement networks.

Leadership development efforts must ensure that critical constituencies previously excluded from leadership roles have a place at the network table. "Networks need to keep bringing in those most affected by the issue and make room for them," Nipper says. "We should push the

boundaries of the network to include constituencies traditionally marginalized."

Identify and fill gaps in the movement's capacity to win. Networks ought to build an honest and shared analysis about where the network is strong and where it lacks the capacity to be an effective player in the movement. As Bowman says, "Networks are catalysts for building capacity for movements and not just individual organizations." Networks must thus focus on "the spaces between [organizations]" and identify "what's the necessary leverage point to get to the next stage of movement building." This doesn't mean that network hubs should fill all these gaps, but it suggests that networks have an important role in helping members identify need and how it might be met.

While networks often aspire to play all these roles, they often fail to live up to their promise. The competition for resources, the pressures of building individual organizations, and the divide between national and local organizations often act as sizable barriers. So while networks can play each of these roles, rarely does one play all simultaneously.

The work of the movement network is shaped and driven by the movements they seek to support rather than only the network itself or its members.

Beware: Calcified Structures Can Clog Network Arteries

Networks are complex and require balancing many varied and seemingly contradictory elements. They juggle the autonomy of individual members with the need for collective action and accountability; hold the needs and engagement of existing and emerging members; straddle political disagreements and differing approaches to the work; and balance transparency and engagement in decision-making processes with the need for efficiency and rapid responses. To get the work done and create predictability and organization, people in networks (and those that attempt to support them) tend to build structures, rules, and procedures.

The problem isn't that we build structures; it's that we get attached to them and believe that they will provide the glue to hold these networks together. Structures get rigid, hardened, calcified. Rather than being vehicles to open space or advance critical work, they start to block the vitality of the network. "Shifts are happening minute by minute and subtly," Nipper says. "A lot depends on where the network comes in during the movement's development." She pauses, then adds, "We need to ask ourselves, 'Do structures help or hurt what the network is called to do?'"

Structures get rigid, hardened, calcified.

Fostering Flexibility

My work suggests that networks that emphasize structure are less effective than those that adeptly learn and change. To support adaptation, interviewees sought to engaging members in some of the following:

Analyze the movement. The network must consider questions such as, "What does the movement call on us to provide?" It examines the current political context, the trajectory of the movement's own development, the opposition, and the movement's successes and failures. It considers other actors within the movement, and looks at what is currently provided and what is missing.

Accept the network's real and potential power. For networks that seek to empower their organizations, leaders, and constituents to take action, it can be difficult to accept the political power of a network. But networks must assess where they do not have the power to effect change. Networks often skip this conversation to their own detriment. It's almost impossible to design winning campaign strategies and build necessary capacity when networks aren't honest about the starting line.[4]

Minimize permanent structure. Effective networks create temporary subunits comprising members within the network that work together to advance goals and engage in certain activities. Depending on the goal, members may need to cede greater or lesser control to a key leader within the network or staff member at the central hub. In this way, aspects of networks' work can be open and decentralized and others highly centralized. Many effective networks avoid making even the best-run units permanent; they allow them to exist for the length of the task and no longer to create room for the next task.

Networks that fail to give space to marginalized voices and bring in new leaders wither.

Make space for marginalized and new voices. Networks that fail to give space to marginalized voices and bring in new leaders wither. In progressive social-justice movements, we must understand how societal oppression plays out within our networks. If we do not, our vision for a just future, our principles, and our values no longer ring true, and the very glue of the movement network disintegrates.

Learn from those outside their movement. When two networks from different movements come together to learn, space for creativity and increased strength opens up. Interviewees for this article were eager to learn how other networks operating within submovements developed, learned, innovated, and adapted. But in the press of their daily work, they rarely found the time to document their own approach and reach out to learn from others.

Experiment. Networks cannot seek agreement from everyone on everything; they would never get work done. Trying to get consensus not only slows the process but also drains an idea of creative juice. Networks can create an environment that welcomes small-scale experiments. Ideas come forth, and those within the network with the energy to pursue these ideas design a small experiment. If the experiment works, it will attract others over time. If it fails, scarce time and resources haven't been wasted. As Bill Traynor writes, effective networks "resource the specific demand" and "starve bad ideas and activities that don't have genuine value."[5]

Identify innovation. Networks should seek innovation and remember that it most frequently emerges from those working on the ground and closest to the issue and constituency. Poggi suggests that network leaders have to pay more attention to visionaries and innovators on the ground and be "a step ahead but without getting too far forward." Doug McAdam echoes this sentiment and says that "peaks in movement activity tend to correspond to the introduction and spread of new protest techniques" or "tactical innovation."[6]

Encourage disagreement and disruption. Networks can become places for experimentation and disruption that help movements innovate and stay ahead of the opposition. "Good movements force [network] leadership to reevaluate, to see new perspectives and fresh ideas, to challenge old ways," says an interviewee. "[You] have to fight; this is the messy part of it. The very innovation that starts well and gets established can get in the way. Upheaval is good."

Change does not always fit neatly into a structure or a process, but seeing the need for it and the ability to harness the creative opportunities that come with change are essential. "The art of leadership in today's world involves orchestrating the inevitable conflict, chaos and confusion of change so that the disturbance is productive rather than destructive," write Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky.[7]

Create time and space for reflection. Network leaders need to build in opportunities to reflect on past efforts and integrate them into the culture of the network.[8] It's critical to include the insight and experiences of those directly affected by the problem that a network seeks to address.

Networks benefit from cultures that honor strategic risk taking and appreciate mistakes as opportunities to learn. They benefit from asking, "Could we have greater impact if we did something differently?" Networks ought to be "less concerned with making 'correct' decisions than with making correctable ones; less obsessed with avoiding error than with detecting and correcting for error," writes Robert Reich, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley.[9]

Connect and align action with vision. While networks seem to learn and adapt best in flexible environments, they also need to consciously build unity, loyalty, and connection to keep members of the network together. The ongoing development and recommitment to shared vision, values, and long-term goals is essential. "When networked nonprofits share the same values, they do not have to try to manage for every contingency" and are less apt to "exert control to ensure quality," write Wei-Skillern and Marciano.[10]

Accepting the Organic Nature of Networks

The highly adaptive nature of networks that seek to contribute to and support social movements challenges the past 30 years of traditional thinking on what it takes to build and develop nonprofit

organizations.[11] If we want to support the development of social movements, we must understand not only individual organizations but also what it takes for them to come together in strong, fluid, adaptive, and effective networks. This requires us to embrace the often messy process of creating and growing networks and to engage in more thinking and discussion to better understand what supports movement networks' learning and adaptation so that they can answer the call at each critical moment.

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Endnotes

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